

Gifts of the Spirit

A few years ago, I attended a friend's ordination as a Deacon in the Uniting Church, in fact, the only ordination I've been to, so I don't know what they're usually like, but this one was huge. More than a hundred and fifty people there. A thirty-minute sermon. Lots of white albs and red scarves and sashes. Even an interpretive dance. The whole service was about an hour and a half, and it took everyone another half hour to file out of the church afterward.

Our last hymn was "How great thou art!" and the newly ordained deacon introduced it as "Christianity's greatest hit". As we filed out, I said to the person next to me "She's wrong – Christianity's greatest hit is 'And can it be'", and they responded that we were both wrong, because the greatest hit was obviously 'Amazing Grace'.

They are, of course, all great hymns. And there are many, many more besides. But they will mean different things to us at different times. They will mean different things to different members of the church. They will highlight different things about God, Jesus and the life of the church.

They are all different, but together they make up the hymn book of the church – and I don't mean a particular red-covered or blue-covered book, but I mean all those songs we sing together as the church, from the most ancient to the most modern. There's a wide range of styles and ages of music. We tend to have a fairly traditional range here (but an excellent one!) but if you check out other churches you will find some familiar, and plenty of unfamiliar music, too. Some of it will be new, some of it you probably wouldn't like, but some of you would.

Those things won't be the same for all of us – we have a range of different backgrounds – and also a range of different preferences.

It's the same with the bible. What's your favourite bible verse?

Famously, when Donald Trump was interviewed on the release of the Trump Bible, he was asked what his favourite bible verse was – President Trump wouldn't do so, and when pressed by an interviewer who appeared to think the president didn't know any verses, said that it was all good. I think he was right – it is all good, but I still have a favourite verse.

And we do have a range of experiences and preferences, and some verses will be more helpful or inspirational or comforting than others.

What's your favourite book of the bible? Again, it's not going to be the same for all of us, and I know my favourite books of the bible change regularly.

At some level, that is really strange: We are Christians, we are following Jesus, and we are all working to live our lives the way Jesus wants us to, right? And our human experience is to conform with others. When you join an organisation, you agree to particular things, to follow the rules of the organisation, and so on.

We like to fit in. And in particular, we like people to fit in with us, because we like people like us. In other words, we want other people to behave like us, to believe like us, and to generally be like us. It can be a jarring experience when we find that our friends hold different opinions about a particular topic than we do.

This is particularly true in the church. After all, we are supposed to be one big happy family, aren't we? Shouldn't we all behave the same way, believe the same way, and agree with each other about all aspects of faith and worship?

I am very aware of our different opinions today, because I've talked about the Day of Mourning. I'm sure there are some people here who are thinking I shouldn't have said anything... and others who are thinking I should have said more.

I also mentioned Donald Trump a short time ago... and I'm sure many of us have fairly strong – if not quite so diverse – opinions on him.

As followers of Jesus, shouldn't we all agree about everything?

That kind of thinking doesn't match what we read in the scriptures. In today's reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul talks about diversity and unity within the church. But he doesn't say what we might expect him to say – that unity demands conformity. Instead he talks about how our diversity works within the unity the church.

Paul was writing to an active and growing church. There were many people exercising a variety of gifts in the church in Corinth, but one gift in particular, was causing trouble — the gift of 'speaking in tongues' which some people thought was the sign of a faithful Christian.

When we think about the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, as an event – *“the sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them”*. But it wasn't just an event, it was the start of something. It was the beginning of the time of the Holy Spirit dwelling within the followers of Jesus, the beginning of the time of each of us being empowered by the Holy Spirit, the time when each of us is gifted by the Holy Spirit.

And while people speaking in other languages was one of the things that happened on that day, it's not quite the same as the 'speaking in tongues' that Paul talks about in his letter to the Corinthians.

As we follow the story of the church from the day of Pentecost – in the book of Acts, and in the letters of the New Testament, and throughout history, we learn of other gifts of the spirit.

Importantly, as we heard in today's reading, we don't all receive the same gifts. Paul makes it clear when he tells us: *There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.* (12:4-6)

So: Many gifts. But one source of all those gifts.

And one purpose of all those gifts: *Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.* (12:7).

One source. Many gifts. One purpose. And it's all of those gifts coming together to work for that purpose.

Paul tells the Corinthians that their diversity is God's gift – the Spirit's gift. And together, embracing that diversity, they are the body of Christ.

And it's the same with us. We are diverse as individuals, but together we are the body of Christ. In this congregation. In this denomination. And ultimately, in the one holy catholic and apostolic church.

In the next couple of verses after today's reading, Paul says *“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For*

in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (12:12-13).

We are one body. But one body with many parts. In the next section, Paul goes on to point out that the eye and the ear and the hand all need each other to make the one body. They may not do the same things, but put them all together, and they make a complete, functional body.

Paul is clear that we don't all receive the same gifts: We don't all speak in tongues, or prophesy, or teach. The Spirit has given each of us a gift according to God's wisdom. But when we use our gifts together, we are the church.

And as we grow in our faith, we need to remember and understand that. We need to listen to, and take to heart, what Paul told the Corinthians. Because we are part of a church, and a congregation, and a denomination with people who are different from us.

Those differences come in many forms. Different gifts. Different preferences in worship and music. Different approaches to working with each other. Different ways of understanding and talking about our faith.

Of course, the chances are that each of us is convinced that our way is the best, and so we often follow the very human response of competing with each other. We compete throughout our lives. We learned to compete with brothers and sisters as children. We compete for the best results in school. We compete in sport. We compete for jobs, and then for promotions. Competition, for most of us, is a way of life.

And so it follows that we end up competing with each other at church. We might not intend to, but it happens. If I don't like the same music as you, we are in competition – who's music will we use? If we don't use the same words our prayers, we can find ourselves in competition. If we disagree on doctrine or theology, we are in competition, and soon enough we will become obsessed with who is right.

Paul exhorts to us not to competition, but instead to cooperation and community. If we view the church as one more place where we compete with each other, it will never be what the Spirit has called us to be.

If we view the church as just another place to compete with each other, then we end up with one of two options:

The first option is to fight it out – whether it's by strength of numbers or finance or force of personality, we can beat each other into conformity. We can fight with each other until the stronger- or simply more resilient - person or the stronger group wins. And the losers will either hang around disheartened, their gifts neglected, or quite possibly just wait for the chance to get their own back.

Or there's the second option: You know that bit in Matthew's gospel where Jesus says “...if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away” (Matt 5:30a)? It seems that sometimes, people want to apply that to the image of the body of Christ that Paul gives...

Chop off the bits we aren't happy with. To drive away the people that don't fit in. Decide that the body doesn't really need the nose, or the hands or the ear (or the person who's talent is playing the drums!), and that actually moves us beyond competing with others to judging them.

I was visiting a church once to take a service, and I was chatting to someone after the service. He had some strong ideas – certainly more radical than most people in the congregation. “Out there” ideas.

One of the Elders asked me afterward why I'd been talking to him – "he's not really one of us" I was told. I don't know what that man's gifts were... but I don't think anyone at that church was ever going to find out.

Neither option is going to lead to a healthy church. If we go back again to Jesus words in John's gospel "*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" (John 13:34-35)

Jesus says we need to love each other. And that loving each other will be a witness to the world! By this everyone will know that we are his disciples.

If people look into our church locally, nationally or globally, and see people in competition with each other or even openly fighting with each other, it's not going to be an appealing thing for them. It's not much of a witness to Jesus or his love.

But if we are loving each other, if we're in community with each other – differences and all, and if we're exercising our gifts cooperatively, and appreciating the gifts of others – then it will be compelling to people.

And to do that, we need to accept our diversity, to work through differences, to compromise with each other, sometimes to hold our tongues, and to let each other explore our own gifts.

Because the gifts of the Holy Spirit are not given so that we can be 'better people', they're given so that we can be a better church.

We are not here merely to use our gifts for our own benefit: Instead, we are here to use those gifts to worship God, to love God, and to support and encourage each other, and to witness to the world.

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

Amen.